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The Researcher and The Rail Replacement Bus: Reflections on The Embodied Fieldwork State

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INTRODUCTION

"Major bridge replacement work at Stockport from Saturday 2 to Friday 22 August." Oh, good, rail replacement buses for my so-called "summer of fieldwork." What was a 21-minute train from my home to Manchester now becomes a 1-hour 10-minute bus journey. A bus upon which, given the winding country lanes, I'm unable to work, read, or do anything much except close my eyes, put in my headphones, and listen to music or a podcast. Undeterred, I go to my local station. The journey is relatively smooth: a nice coach, plenty of space, beautiful scenery. I have time to think about what it is that I'm doing, where I'm going, what I'm hoping to achieve from the day, how I should behave, whom I want to speak to, what topics to bring up and how, photographs I want to take, places I want to visit. I have these thoughts before each day of fieldwork. What is different today is the travel time available to me. My usual journey is autopilot by now. I know what times the trains are, how long I have to change, how long the walk is from the station. The act of travelling to my site has been considered as part of my project's methodology: I choose to walk and travel by public transport as a way of seeing more, of being physically present in the area, my feet treading the same pavements as local people and those who came before me. This is important

to me. Today is different, though, and my thoughts don't follow the usual path. The bus has shaken up the routine. As I watch the landscape gradually change from green fields to post-industrial buildings, from sparsely dotted houses to giant shiny skyscrapers, I pass the "City of Manchester" sign. I think about my own position as I pass this boundary. Am I in "fieldwork mode," toggled according to this seemingly arbitrary boundary? Seeing the sign highlights the lack of clarity of my own boundary, the line between "civilian" and "researcher." At what point in this journey will I shift into the role of researcher? Is it when stepping out of the house, or when arriving at the site? Does the journey form part of the experience every time? Is it dependent upon county, town, postcode? Essentially: how can we locate the point at which fieldwork begins?

Geertz's classic ethnographic experience as part of a crowd fleeing from Balinese police during research is often presented as an expression of "true" fieldwork: by running with local people rather than highlighting the privileged outside position of the researcher, Geertz was able to achieve an embodied state of participation (Lee and Ingold 2006, 92-93). This immersion in research, of allowing instinct and a group mentality to guide his actions, illustrates the absolute state of being to which researchers aspire in the field. In this anecdote, Geertz was physically positioned at his research site: a cock fight in Bali. He writes that before the incident, he and his fellow researcher wife were "nonpersons, specters, invisible men" (Geertz 1973, 422). In the essay, Geertz uses thick description to recount the tale, providing a narrative account of the shift from outsider to a state of belonging that extended beyond the corporeal. The journey to the site, described in the first line, is markedly less descriptive, reading "Early in April of 1958, my wife and I arrived […]" (Geertz 1973, 422).

In many ethnographies, the researcher's journey receives, understandably, little consideration. It is, after all, the musical experience, the cultural immersion, the embodied sense of belonging with which much ethnomusicological study is concerned. Alongside traditional ethnographies, several texts providing practical advice on the *how* of fieldwork are available for students and emerging researchers. Pollard's 2009 interviews with PhD researchers reveal a shared lack of preparedness for fieldwork and the resultant impacts on student mental health and wellbeing. In this work, Pollard provides examples of the researcher travelling to faraway locations, often international, with a different language and set of circumstances, highlighting dangerous situations including interrogations and working with local authorities (Pollard 2009).

For researchers in similar positions, it is reasonable to consider arriving on international soil as the physical "beginning" of the fieldwork experience. It is at the point at which local customs, language, and behaviours are adopted and enacted by the researcher, forming the embodied state required during fieldwork immersion. The collecting, indexing, and interpreting of sights and practices in the field is achieved through the utilisation of distinct forms of "gaze" beyond sightseeing or casual tourism (Urry and Larsen 2011, 1-30). As ethnomusicology has evolved from explorations of the "exotic others" to working with more localized sub/cultures, the line between "self" and "researcher" has become less clear. For many researchers, particularly students, field sites close to home are common, often alongside complementary commitments such

as teaching. This creates a blurring of the boundary between vernacular practices and occupying the embodied state of the researcher. Increasingly, "the other now lives next door" (Barz and Cooley 2008, 150). If these boundaries are less concrete, how and when are they crossed? To take the example of a particular building as a fieldwork site, the crossing of the threshold would provide a naturally suitable place at which this transition occurs. But what of the interaction with local people outside the building? What of the discussion with a fellow public transport passenger on the journey? How quickly can the researcher shift into what I will term "fieldwork state?"

FIELDWORK STATE

When considering a process of entering the fieldwork state, there is a critical difference between instinctual and conscious embodiment. Geertz provides an example of the instinctual: in a potentially dangerous situation, the "fight or flight" response naturally alters behaviour, resulting in a flow state. Ethnographic fieldwork conducted in everyday locations can provide opportunities for the researcher to enter this state of unconscious absorption during participatory experiences such as sharing musicking (Small 1998) with research subjects. Conscious embodiment, in contrast, requires the researcher to adapt their behaviours and outward appearance to suitably position themselves within the field. This requires constant re-evaluation, as once the researcher has successfully embedded within a community, the need to shape behaviour is often necessary to continue positive relationships, particularly in the case of reluctant gatekeepers (Leigh et al. 2021, 1081). The conscious fieldwork state, therefore, is a complex convergence of physical and mental considerations, including but not limited to:

- Adherence to local customs;
- Personal safety;
- Relationship building/maintenance;
- Respect;
- Upholding ethical research principles;
- Confidentiality;
- Openness;
- Consideration of research objectives;
- Active participation (in some cases).

Alongside these ever-evolving elements is the necessity to remain vigilant, alert, and retain an academic and critical curiosity. The practice of "being there" can be physically and mentally draining. Madden (2017, 75) suggests that ethnographic participation, while requiring structure and careful design, often does not feel like "hard" work when considered in contrast with other forms of data collection. I would argue that the complex negotiations required for dealing with interlocutors during participatory research can often create significant challenges. This is particularly true of researchers working in locations in which they may be subject to additional

challenges or dangers related to gender, sexuality, or other demographic factors (see Appert 2017, Barz 2020). It is reasonable to suggest that, given these challenges, the researcher may choose to "switch off" the fieldwork state during travel or time away from active participation. But at what point is it switched on, and is it as simple as stepping into the role of fieldworker?

BECOMING A FIELDWORKER

Assuming the role of the researcher requires a shift in physical, emotional, and mental states not dissimilar to those experienced by actors. Indeed, the word "role" is analogous to acting. To extend this metaphor, then, this reflection is concerned with locating the point at which the Director calls "action."

Norum et al.'s (2021, 349) reflections on sensory and affective engagements within fieldwork state that the act itself "remains somewhat shrouded in mystery, a process during which technical and performative tasks are put together in often prescribed ways in order to generate (if we're lucky) new knowledge." Among these performative tasks are the emotional and sensory elements of fieldwork, which combine with the technical to elevate the experience from doing to being: the technical elements as the necessary underpinnings of "getting it done," whilst the additional sensorial inputs and outputs of an embodied experience enable richer participant observation. To return to Geertz, by sharing with his interlocutors such extreme physical reactions as fear, confusion, and adrenaline, the sensorial elements of fleeing enabled the experience to shift from doing to being. Emotions, alongside the senses, are an additional key element in creating a powerful fieldwork experience. Fieldworkers must reflect on the impact of emotions on their ability to sense and experience similar corporeal reactions as their subjects (Backe and Fitzpatrick 2024, 158). Whilst it is possible to enter the field as an actor, assuming the role of researcher and merely working at a surface level, it is sensory and emotional awareness which enable the fieldworker to accumulate richer data. Here, the positionality of the researcher may afford an initial degree of access to such experiences owing to entering the field as an "insider," but the contrasted experience of an outsider can provide the reflexive opportunity to develop a unique path to deep fieldwork (Culliney and Pessina 2022).

CONCLUDING REFLECTIONS

To return to the bus of the opening vignette, the location of the boundary between a fieldworker and a researcher's natural state of being is not as clear as the sign indicating the geographical boundaries of a city. Something as quotidian as the ding of a phone notification may cause a lapse, pulling the researcher out of the embodied state of "fieldworker." What is therefore required is a flow between these divergent states, a flux which is enacted and reflexively refined with experience and self-belief.

During a casual conversation, a neighbour informs me that they grew up in the area on which my PhD project is focused. This immediately causes a physical reaction: my posture changes, my words become slower and more carefully considered, my mind races through questions and dates and scrambles to position the neighbour's experience within the timeline of the area. I feel this change and am surprised by how naturally it occurs. In a taxi, travelling between two parts of Manchester on a tight deadline, I conversationally tell the driver about my project to pass the time. As soon as he mentions the building where I am based, I feel the changes happen again, almost like a reflex.

*Over time, I notice the shift occurring with greater frequency, and not always when I am physically present on "*site*," but when I see or hear mentions of people and places I am working with. The subconscious fieldwork state has become instinctual, and I find this reassuring: I can trust myself to switch on the researcher when required. What was previously a conscious process of becoming a fieldworker is now an intuitive practice. Before each fieldwork visit, I think of Geertz and his adventures. If I am presented with a safe and ethical opportunity to be a part of something, to share the sensorial and emotional experiences of my interlocutors, I will take it. Whilst I increasingly have trust in my instincts to switch on the fieldwork state, I am conscious that regular reflexive work on my fieldwork practice will facilitate the richest experiences.*

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